

## WHAT IS A PERFIN by Brian Birch

Michael Rucklidge stirred up a hornets nest in Bulletin 251/7 by posing the seemingly innocent question "What is a Perfin?". Since the responses, in Bulletin 252/5-7, merely served to obscure the subject further, I attempted to clarify the situation by means of a short article dealing with all the points brought out in the correspondence - Bulletin 256/8-10.

In Bulletin 259/4-5, David Andersen contributed a critique of my definition which prompts me once again to respond.

(Ed:- this article has been in my 'in-file' for some months awaiting a suitable slot for inclusion.)

### ANDERSEN'S POSITION

Andersen voiced two doubts about the following definition of a perfin, which I promulgated:-

"A perfin is a number of holes in a distinct pattern applied to postage and other stamps as security against theft."

This definition was not intended to be a rigorous definition. It was not really my definition in any case, it was simply a definition derived from Mike Rucklidge's contribution and its purpose was merely to demonstrate how easily a workable definition could be devised. As a definition, it certainly has shortcomings, two of which immediately spring to mind:-

- a) It does not admit of a perfin comprising a single hole.
- b) It does not differentiate between stamps bearing holes produced by a perforating machine, a punch or even a rouletting machine.

Still, it serves its purpose as a workable definition for those not really concerned with absolutely correct definitions.

### ANDERSEN'S FIRST DOUBT

The motive behind the production of the perfin (i.e. "as security against theft") can not be proven even for commercial users never mind private individuals.

This is in fact the inversion of an extremely important attribute of a definition:- the provision of "tests" within the definition to determine whether an item meets the requirements of the definition or not.

The above definition then, provides three tests, all of which must be satisfied in order for an item to be called a perfin:-

- 1) Is it a stamp?
- 2) Has it got holes in it?
- 3) Has it been marked with a distinct pattern intended to provide security against theft?

It should be noted that all stamps, including trading stamps, meet the first test. The second test is satisfied by stamps separated by perforations and even with worm holes in. Finally, many items are indelibly marked to prevent theft and thus would pass the third test. However, only a perfin meets all of these tests.

Thus, it is entirely consistent to say that stamps bearing the perforated insignia of a certain company, which were produced only for advertising purposes, are not perfins. Such an item fails the "test" of being "to provide security against theft". However, it is not acceptable to say that the definition is faulty because there are instances where the motive for perforation is in doubt or cannot be proven and where, therefore, the test can neither be passed nor failed. Under such circumstances, it is the item which is in doubt, not the definition.

#### ANDERSEN'S SECOND DOUBT

Historically, the term perfin encompassed items other than those perforated to prevent theft.

Here, Andersen quotes Warren Travell, an American writing in the late 1940's, as his authority. My files also confirm that Travell considered that perforated revenue cancellations should be included in the perfin field. However, those views are from an article on what to collect, not one devoted to definitions.

A single reference is not sufficient authority upon which to condemn the definition. In reality, Americans have a problem with perfins on revenue stamps to such an extent that perfins (not perforated cancellations mind you!) found only on revenue stamps are not listed in the Perfins Club Catalogue. (American Revenues can be found bearing the same perfin as is found on postage stamps, with perfins never found on postage stamps and with perforated cancellations which can not be distinguished from perfins once the stamps have been soaked off their documents.)

## ANDERSEN'S SOLUTION

Andersen suggests that a wider definition based on the method of production and the end result would be better than one based on a condition that is impossible to verify. - why?

I can not accept that the language of philately is so impoverished that it is unable to distinguish between the various categories of perforations known to be applied to stamps.

Inevitably perhaps, we must return to basic principles when considering the definition of perfins. It must also be borne in mind that nothing should be defined in isolation and that perfins are only a part of the field of Security Endorsements. I would therefore refer Andersen and others to my original "Glossary of Security Endorsements", serialised in the Society's Bulletin in 1987. Here can be found the definition of all the perfin-related items found perforated:-

Commemorative perfin; Film processing perfin; Perfin;  
Perforated cancellation; Perforated precancel; Personal  
Perfin; Philatelic Perfin; Private perfin; Pseudoperfin;  
Specimen perforation.

Even this list shows that a balance must be struck between absolute accuracy and what is generally used terminology. For example, it is obvious that items defined by the terms Commemorative perfin; Film processing perfin and Philatelic perfin would fail the test of being used to provide security against theft, and that such items should rather be called Commemorative perforation; Film processing perforation and Philatelic perforation. However, custom and practice demands that they are all termed "perfins" and I am not so much of a purist as to fight against that tradition.

## CONCLUSIONS

It does not seem right to me that we should willingly relinquish one of the English language's greatest assets - its tremendous diversity which gives it such versatility and enables it to accurately describe small variations and nuances.

In consequence, I can see no useful purpose in extending the definition of perfins to incorporate all perforated stamps.

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